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18 September 1968

MEMORANDUM FOR: George Carver, SAVA

SUBJECT : The Cambodian Border Problem

1. Cambodia's insistence on international recognition of its frontiers is essentially an attempt to commit the major powers, morally at least, to the continued existence of Cambodia as a nation. This policy may appear unnecessary to many, but to Prince Sihanouk and other Cambodians the salient feature of modern Cambodian history is the unrelenting pressure on its territory by the neighboring Thai and Vietnamese, and the problem is real enough. Militarily weak and so far unable to secure boundary treaties or agreements with these states, Sihanouk has come to rely on diplomacy among the powers to safeguard Cambodian territory against the Thai and Vietnamese encroachments which he anticipates will follow the end of the war in Vietnam.

2. Paradoxically, settlement of the existing border conflicts between Cambodia and its neighbors, South Vietnam and Thailand, would be relatively easy from a legal and cartographic standpoint

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(though actual demarcation on the ground would be difficult so long as hostilities persist in South Vietnam). The areas in dispute are small, sparsely populated, and of little intrinsic value. The dispute with Thailand centers on the ownership of the politically sensitive temple site known as Preah Vihear which is in Cambodian hands as a result of a 1961 World Court decision; the Thai want at least a share in its administration. Sihanouk's border problems with South Vietnam are more numerous and result from differing interpretations of French maps and documents demarcating the boundary. There are at least eight areas in dispute, including certain small islands in the Gulf of Siam, but Cambodia is constantly adding to the number, apparently in response to the course of military operations by Allied forces in South Vietnam. Among the disputed areas are several where heavy fighting has occurred in recent years: * a few square miles in Cambodia's northeastern salient, a few square miles west of Duc Co along Route 19, a few square miles west of the Chu Pong mountains in the upper Ia Drang region, a 21-square-mile area southwest of Duc Lap, a small area northeast of Bu Dop, and another northwest of Loc Ninh. There

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is also a recent Cambodian claim to a fairly broad area along the northern frontier of South Vietnam's Tay Ninh Province; the area is a sensitive one, the site of major Viet Cong bases. Farther south, in the delta lands, the Cambodians have a few minor claims along the courses of the Mekong and its numerous distributaries. In the Gulf of Siam, Cambodia is concerned lest it lose control of certain disputed islands which screen its ports of Kep and Ream.

3. Even in total, Cambodia's disputed border areas are of little or no intrinsic value to either party. Attempts at settlement are greatly complicated, however, by the deep-seated animosities among the nations involved and these show few signs of abating in the near future. For the US, therefore, any decision to meet Sihanouk's demands on the border question involves the possibility of some unfavorable repercussions in Bangkok and Saigon.

4. Another problem for the US, primarily legal in nature, is Sihanouk's inflexibility with regard to the wording of statements granting recognition of Cambodia's borders. He demands respect for and recognition of the sovereignty of Cambodia "within the limits of its present frontiers." He rejects as inadequate any formulation

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which merely recognizes the "invioleability" of Cambodia's present frontiers. All major powers -- except the US, the UK, and Japan -- have satisfied him in this regard; and the Japanese will soon do so.

5. It should be noted that even if the US complied with Sihanouk's wishes and even if Thailand and South Vietnam soon settled their border problems with him, border incidents and violations are likely to continue so long as the Asian parties remain basically hostile to one another and the war in Vietnam goes on.

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